

THE PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

It is fair to say I was in love with my camera in high school. It was a used and somewhat battered Canon AE-1, but I had bought it with my own money, after working all summer putting on a roof on our neighbour's house. My father bought the lenses – the job didn't pay for everything. The camera gave me a professional feeling, bolstered by the fact I was being supplied Kodak Ektachrome ASA 100 slide film by my arts teacher for my projects. No one else got to do that. It did not matter to me it was an act of self-defence from the teacher who was thus spared my pitiful work with pen and paper.

I was one of the Young Turks at the Camera Club of my school. The Club, maybe 30 students strong, was divided along the Nikon-Canon fault line, along which sudden and strong earthquakes were common. The Nikonists would vouch for the quick and secure bayonet lens mount of Nikon, whereas the Canonians were semi-religious in their faith in Canon's optical quality. The next day the rage would be Nikon's zooms, the day after that, Canon's macro extension rings.

There was also an enclave of Olympus shutterbugs, but they were a definite minority, as were those with hand-me-down Pentaxes from their parents. And of course there was the token East German Praktica owner, a gawky, sullen boy who blended into the blackboard and rarely spoke. Girls would have been very much appreciated, but we had none. The only living example we ever saw visited one Club meeting with her bright red Konica StarShot and fled in terror.

My material of choice was Kodak's Tri-X black and white film. At ASA 400, it was fast enough for capturing the school festivals on film, especially the dance troupe after I used all my savings on a Metz flash. Sized and designed like a kitchen mixer, it was strong enough to let me grab telephoto pics of the disco dancers, Christmas plays, and graduating students in May. Of course, these pics would then be sold at a nice profit.

I used to buy the film in 100 feet rolls, then spool them into canisters myself. Many an afternoon was spent in the darkroom in the dimmest of red lights, fumbling to feed the end of the film into the slit in the spool of the canister. Nevertheless, it was a big part of the pro feeling to wind your own films. No matter if some of the films had a funny streak that wouldn't expose properly; sometimes it added to the value of the picture. The random, artistic touch.

And then, with fifteen freshly loaded rolls of film in my camera bag, I hit the streets. I shot the bus parked by the penetrating lights of the city library, and the barren November poplar standing naked against the billboard; I set the camera on two-second exposure and placed it on the park bench to capture the barely human blobs of people passing by. Plenty of targets to shoot, and I felt like Robert Capa minus the combat.

I rarely processed the films myself. I had ruined enough rolls by botched timing in the process, so I regularly visited SL-Foto and had them do the dirty work. However, I always developed my pictures after picking up the negatives. For a painfully shy boy it was also a handy way of luring girls into a darkroom lit by a single red bulb, even if only to show them the magic of the picture appearing on an exposed photo paper. Despite my wild dreams, I never got anywhere, but I developed truckloads of pictures.

The high point of every month was the Table Competition. The name derived from the structure of the competition, which was to lay all participating pictures on the large table in the physics class, and number them. Then we'd all walk around the table, in solemn silence, examining all the pictures, judging the exposure, focus, layout, and general quality in our little expert minds, and marking lines of acceptance by the numbers on our pieces of paper. Unmarked, the lists were then collected and the lines counted, and the winner would emerge from the anonymous total. The prize would be something like a 100-sheet stack of photo paper, paid for by the diminutive budget of the Camera Club, or in rare cases, sponsored by one of the photo shops in town. Those stacks usually had best before dates quite close to the competition.

On one occasion, it was a double competition. There was a slide set as well, shown to all, with the slide numbers chanted by the club curator. It was a semi-religious event in the cavernous, darkened physics class, which had one of the two slide projectors in the entire school. We'd stare at each slide for exactly one minute, making notes, and then hear "Slide number sixteen..." and the clicketyclack of the Zeiss projector changing the slide from a swimming Samoyed puppy, clicketyclack, to a crooked old pine tree in Lapland, clicketyclack. Two runs of all the twenty slides in the competition, and the winner was a picture by my friend Pasi.

I hated the picture that won. It was simply too good. I'd never taken any as good as that, and I felt envy replacing bile in my digestive tract. Pasi went to Lapland with his family, and happened to be at the peak of one of the fjells when the Midnight Sun was at its lowest point in the north. The colors were exquisite, the composition traditional but appropriate to the event; and to top it all, a plane's contrail traversed the sky like God's cocaine line, rendering it into two distinct entities. He won hands down, and to add insult to injury, the reward was a gift certificate to SL-Foto, where he eventually got the coolest filter set ever seen in the Club.

As I walked out of Alamo, I said under my breath, "Lucky shot".

Pertti, my nemesis if there ever was one, heard me. "Lucky shot? Listen, buddy, you wouldn't know the right moment to shoot a pic that good if it hit you over the head with a 400 mm telephoto lens. Pasi knew when the photo opportunity was there, and took it. Luck had nothing to do with that. Sore loser..." He went on his way.

With this defeat still fresh in my mind, I was very happy when my father announced he was taking me to Agadir, Morocco, over the New Year. At least I'd have a chance to shoot some pictures no one else was going to get. It was a trip for tennis in the sun — the hotel had its own oasis for the game, with a shuttle service. We had fourteen neighbours for company. I

polished and honed and quadruple-checked my equipment. These photo ops would not pass me by because of malfunctions.

We met the neighbours at the airport, and amidst all the jokes and wisecracks about the upcoming trip, I lost sight of my father. He was missing for half an hour, and when he returned, he had a plastic bag from the Duty Free shop. I was handed a bag of candy for the flight, much to my irritation; I had already prepared for the trip by buying the latest issue of *Amateur Photography* – candy was for kids. I did see there was at least a bottle in the bag though, and something else, but I didn't care to see what.

I'd never seen such colors as hit me when the door of the plane opened into the hot, humid air of Agadir. We landed late in the day, and the shadows were already long; the sky was the deepest azure blue I'd seen, and it became deeper by the minute. The Sun was a ball of liquid gold on its way to pass into a new day through the night, and as we exited the passport control, it was already gone. We reached the hotel in darkness and settled in, and I loaded my AE-1 with Ektachrome slide film, renowned for its depth of color, and bulk loaded by me of course. By the time I checked the battery on the camera, I felt definitely like John Wayne.

If the hues of the evening had hit me, so did the colors of morning. The Sun was high in the sky, far higher than it ever could go in Finland under the current natural order. I was amazed to see practically no shadow following me as I walked out to the Souk. I fell in love with the warm brown colour of the earthenware jugs on sale at every corner, and I shot pictures of quite a few before realizing they'd never be in short supply. I also marvelled the wonderful contrasts I could get with the stark, searing sunlight when it hit the white-chalked buildings.

Then I saw the patterns. On every house there'd be intricate curving patterns, which reminded me of Celtic symbols, but probably had more to do with the Islamic tradition. I interpreted them as flowers first, but the variety they presented soon had me lost for meaning. Nothing like that was ever seen back home, so I documented them for the benefit of the Camera Club, for an anthropological purpose. No sooner did I reach the Souk some two kilometres from the hotel than I realized I'd shot four rolls in half an hour. This was not sustainable, even by my pro standards.

I returned to the hotel an hour later with five full rolls of slides, and I explained all of this to my father. He listened like only a father of four can, when confronted by the youngest on something larger than life. Now, twenty-five years after the event, I can understand he listened to not a word of my torrential tale; he probably thought of who he should pick for his partner in the evening foursomes, or something like that. But at the time I basked in the rays of paternal approval, like the children of Amenhotep in the stone pillars at Thebes.

Tennis and chasing photo ops made time fly, and soon enough it was the day before flying home. I had exhausted my supply of film down to the level I had to ration it; only 15 frames a day, to make my film last the whole two weeks. I felt starved. Walking down the street for the last time, I lamented not being able to shoot the golden fur cats lying on the sun-

baked wall of a house, defying gravity with their limp postures, and I kicked pebbles at dogs having a committee meeting around a bright green lamppost, each delivering their smelly opinions and comparing the results. The colors and the scents of Agadir had intoxicated me, and I wanted to document every minute.

It began to get dark. First the streets got dark as sunlight evaded them and started to crawl up the whitewashed stone walls. Then the line of last light climbed to windows and I lost sight of the Sun as it fell towards the sea. I was close to the hotel already, so I headed home. I glanced at the exposure meter on the camera, and it registered 36, a full roll. Sometimes there were a couple shots in the roll still, and the setting sun invited me to get that one picture I knew I didn't yet have – the perfect photo op. I hopped up the stairs to make it to the room before the Sun took the final plunge.

As I opened the door and barged in, I didn't see my father anywhere. This wasn't new; he had had many a nice drink with the friends we had brought with us, and appeared later. But as I went into the room and was pierced by the final rays of the sun, flooding in through the open door of the balcony, I saw him. He sat on a barstool he'd taken out. In his left hand he had a large glass of cognac, and in his right, a thick brown cigar. He was facing the setting sun, dressed in nothing but his tennis shorts, not moving at all except for the occasional sip and smoke. It looked to me like a yoga exercise, but surely one does not yoga with cognac, or a cigar. An Egyptian sun-worship ritual more like it, I thought.

I froze in my tracks and brought the camera to my eye, as if stalking a rare beast for the cover of National Geographic. I looked through the viewfinder and saw my perfect moment. The thick smoke of the cigar swirled in the gentle wind from the Atlantic, forming a grey cloud around my entranced father, filtering rays of sun into distinct objects of linear gold. Sunlight penetrated the cognac too, and glancing sideways, I saw there was a Renault XO bottle on the table, as well as a wooden cigar box. My sweaty thumb turned the film lever, and I hoped he didn't hear the ratchet. As soon as the frame would load, I'd press the button and achieve immortality and lasting fame for the next contest.

But the spool didn't have a full frame. The lever turned maybe four-fifths of the way, and I heard the sound of the sprockets beginning to tear off the film. I had to stop turning it. I had shot eighteen rolls, a goddamn six hundred forty-eight pictures, and I ran out of film at the moment the only worthwhile image was there for the taking. I knew it'd turn out perfect, but I had no more marble to chisel.

Something alerted my father to my presence, he turned to face me, and the magic of the moment passed in a puff of smoke. The sun was there, but his connection to the eternal Sun God vanished. He didn't see it like that. He was just enjoying a smoke and some damn fine cognac, but for me, it was a glimpse into the ancient times. I put on a vague smile and told him of my latest photographic escapades at the Souk, but inside, I knew I'd blown it - I'd seen the moment and failed. Pertti was wrong, but I had nothing to prove him wrong.

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My father passed away last year, at eighty-six. At his funeral I told my brother of the missed photo op, and together we smiled with misty eyes. "He must have looked real happy," my brother said, "but did he ever tell you why he wanted to go to Africa?"

"No – I only thought he wanted to play tennis with some friends."

"When the Winter War broke out, he was eighteen. He was still in school, but he was drafted for guard duty. The Army made him walk around the National Rifle Factory. Now, the winter of 1939 was bitterly cold, he had second rate equipment, and he was miserable through the night shifts. They bombed the factory and he had to be the last to go to the shelter, when the bombs already fell all around." My brother took some more coffee.

"We were having a sauna a few years back, at the summerhouse, and he told me of the guard duty. He had promised himself that night, when he lay in the snow with the Russian bombs raining on the factory, that if he makes it out of this alive, he'll once see the sunset in Africa, and he'll have the best possible drink and the biggest possible cigar to go with it."